

Dickinson, Brent. John Bauer Is Producing Heat after Death. Curator. March 2nd, 2016.

CURATOR

John Bauer Is Producing Heat after Death

March 2, 2016 [Brent Everett Dickinson](#)

Around 1980, at about the time when the surviving members of Joy Division changed their name to New Order, Bernard Sumner, their lead guitarist, said “Our music had become so incredibly dark and cold, we couldn’t really get any darker or colder.” Of course, as that statement suggests, their freshly minted name was not the only change the group was fixing to make post-Ian Curtis. The band was set to embark on a turnabout of their sonic identity—modifying their iconic post-punk sound to something that would incorporate the synthetic instruments and some formal elements of electronic club music. These changes were the basis for correcting their perceived temperature problem, to experience heat after death.

The idea of heat is of paramount importance within the context of art and life. Metaphor or actual, for warm-blooded creatures like us there is an understood equation in place: heat = life, cold = death. As Ian Curtis’s body grew significantly colder after hanging himself by a rope in his kitchen, the band responded by raising the temperature in the room.

American painter John Bauer has spent much of his artistic career producing heat after death. A conversation about heat in the contemporary art world is often a conversation about the international collectors’ market. Mr. Bauer has shown extensively in commercial galleries around the U.S. and Europe and his collector base is an auspicious group comprised of some of the biggest fish—he is certainly in his own right a “hot commodity”. However, this of course is not the kind of heat of which this essay concerns itself. This other kind of heat surely includes the flash (spark) of inspired production, but is most basically embodied in the image of a kid who climbs into her father’s La-Z-Boy immediately after he has gotten up and feels the warmth left by his recently departed body. This warmth is the natural byproduct of the proximate and intimate interaction between a warm body, a hot mind and materials. In as much as this heat is an inevitable outcome of simple presence and consciousness, what is remarkable about the heat of Mr. Bauer’s work is how unlikely it is given the absence of those very baseline ingredients. The terrain of Bauer’s work is an icy graveyard, populated by cold La-Z-Boys of long-departed artistic fathers. But yet, there is heat nonetheless.

Let us break this down. First of all, what death in particular? To determine the exact elements of death in John Bauer’s work requires one to inventory the many autopsy reports on the state of painting over the last century: death of aura at the hands of mechanical reproduction (Walter Benjamin), death of expressive and authentic mark-making at the hands of pop vacuity (Robert Hughes), death of authorial agency at the hands of the risen reader (Roland Barthes), etc. These supposed deaths provide the front-door entrance to his central themes.

Not only does Bauer's conceptual program move through and operate upon a chilly burial ground, even his studio methodology and practice is of a frosty persuasion. Much of his output over the last ten years has utilized a strict palette of black, white, and silver. When he has added color—a move that in the hands of most artists is an effort to lighten or warm things up—it's been with two specific, seemingly encoded colors: a kind of sultry but vacant lipstick pink and an icy azure blue.



John Bauer, *Trash and Vaudeville*, 2009, Oil and enamel on linen, 71" x 79"

Working in concert with, but proving even more important than his hyperborean palette, are his studio methods. Bauer developed a twofold process that works to distance his hand from his painting practice. Part one of the process is producing, photographing and archiving a bank of images featuring painterly moves that bear the resemblance of authentic expression. These images are captured, compressed, disembodied and preserved in binary code and function as his raw materials. Part two is a hybrid process that involves Photoshop, stenciling, direct painting and silkscreen transfer, which allows him to combine these elements in various ways on the canvas, accumulating layers of “marks” that, when seen semiotically, are the equivalent of peering through vast screens of language. Bauer uses transparency and a sometimes profound collapsing of pictorial space, which has the net effect of making these painterly languages barely coherent, fragmentary and distant to the viewer. In the world of communication, language that is received in an incoherent, fragmentary and distant format—like echo-y pings heard riding on cosmic currents or phantom so-called numbers stations broadcasts coming through a shortwave radio—is by all estimates cold as hell!

Bauer's most recent exhibition, which was shown in the Duke Gallery of Azusa Pacific University, was based on a small but focused selection of his blue paintings. The exhibition title BSOD—Blue Screen of Death—is a computer technician's shorthand for the blue error screen displayed on a Windows computer system after a fatal system error occurs. Good titles, such as BSOD, can serve as a helpful interpretive framework for an

exhibition, shaping the way one experiences and reads the work. The notion of failure is a thing that factors heavily into Bauer's thinking as a particular threshold beyond which a system acts—if it acts at all—in erratic and unpredictable ways.



At the core of paint production, breakdown is fundamental. Pigment is pulverized into miniscule bits and floated in a liquid medium. A pigment's material integrity must be broken down to give way to its full range of expressive and formal possibilities. Within a conventional user context, a Blue Screen of Death is the end of the road. But to a hacker, it is truly the beginning of something potentially vibrant and generative. From one point of view the BSOD is the cold, hard death of something; from another perspective it is the warm occasion of possibility. And so, seen in this way, we start to perceive the fulcrum—that point where Bauer's efforts, almost despite themselves, begin to pivot toward heat. In John Bauer's work and working process, he is collecting the long dead residue of authentic expression, and through mechanical and synthetic processes is rearranging, relayering, repeating, filtering, sifting, shifting, controlling, alt-ing and selectively deleting these things into a re-actuated warmth. By virtue of constant movement and reworking, a kind of frictional heat has developed. By virtue of prolonged exposure and connectivity between his themes and his active mind, with his sincere belief as conduit, there is an electrical charge that is dangerously warm to the touch. As Dr. Frankenstein channeled lightning into his nonhuman to give it life, Bauer channels the electric charge of his own corporeal presence into his non-paintings to give them the heat of life. This embodied presence of the artist, which need not be much more involved than just showing up, is what a daily practice of painting looks like today. John Bauer is an artist making paintings after the end of painting—and those paintings are HOT!

Featured Image: John Bauer, *Vicious II*, 2008, 90" x 70", oil and enamel on linen